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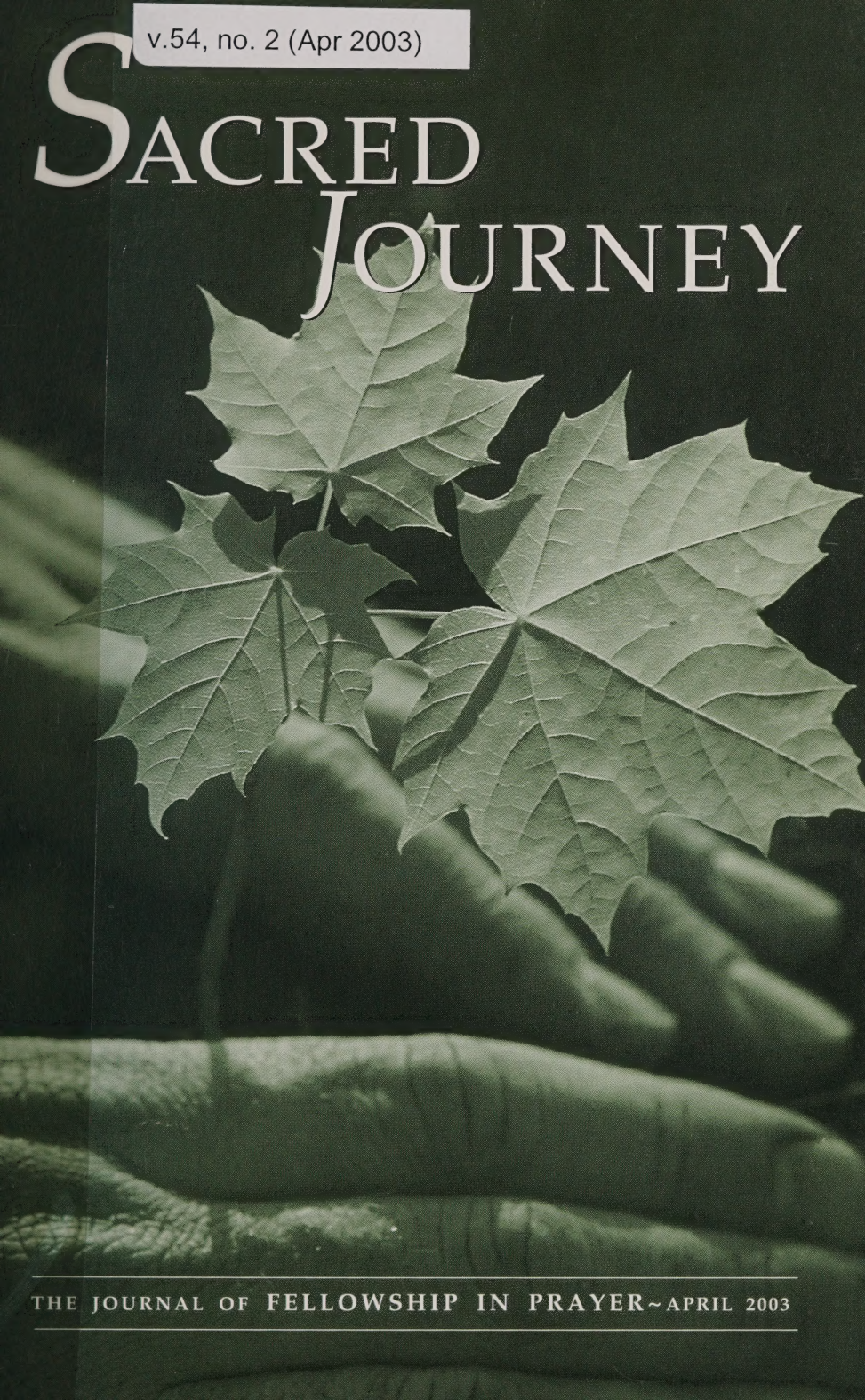

THE JOURNAL OF FELLOWSHIP IN PRAYER ~ APRIL 2003

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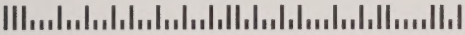

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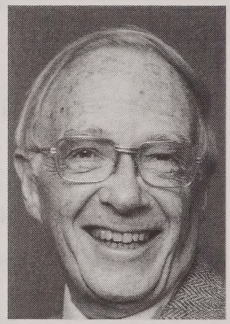
Your Love, Compassion, & Wisdom Can Help Repair the World



Remembrance, joy, hope. In April, jonquils, blue birds, baby deer, and the benevolent breezes of spring remind us that life can be beautiful. Nature stubbornly continues to bring us those God-given realities despite all the ugliness, grief, and despair with which we humans continue to poison the natural goodness of our earth. War, corruption, greed, and the slaughter of innocents continue to be the hallmarks of human power, whoever exercises it.

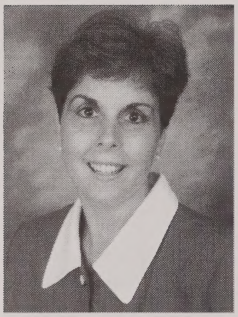
Will the observations in April of Easter, Passover, Ramnavami, Wesak, the Yaqui Deer Dance, and other celebrations of the victory of life over death bring an end to the violence and evil that seem to be such an overwhelming part of the possession and exercise of power? Probably not.

But if organized religion can do little to bring peace to the world, can you and I, as individuals, do any better?

The answer is yes! And not because Jesus and Gandhi showed what individuals can do to help repair the world. We may not be like them, but as the risen Christ taught, we have the ability—you and I—to change the small part

of the world we inhabit, one day at a time. We can do so by practicing random acts of kindness, just because it's a God-given part of our true self to do so. Simple as it sounds, that practice can transform us, one person at a time, into the good people we have it in us to be. And the effects of such a widening pool of transformed women and men who want happiness, freedom from suffering, and peace for all beings, regardless of their religion, politics, nationality or any other qualification, can be simply tremendous.

We Need to Hear from You



The word *person* when broken down to its linguistic roots means "to sound forth." Each person we meet is in a very real sense a creature with something special that must sound forth from the depths. As spring approaches notice how the birds sing. Not a one sings shyly as if embarrassed to do what is innate. Why then do we human creatures often shrink back from voicing to our truest stories, heartfelt beliefs, or groans too deep for words? After all, it's part and parcel of being a person to speak up, to give voice, to enact what we know, and feel, and believe.

Not surprisingly, preachers and teachers and swamis and prophets of all traditions use the spoken word to instruct and inspire others. Reverend Barbara Brown Taylor, an episcopal priest listed by Newsweek Magazine as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English language, claims in this month's interview conducted by Garnette Arledge, that "People are looking for a place, a voice, a sound to take up residence." Sounds like she's saying people are all looking and listening for those who will "sound forth" what is true and challenging, noble and kind.

When facing heart surgery, Mary Ann McAlpine prepares by prayer, meditation, and visualization. Read "A

Small Matter of a Miracle" to learn what can result from claiming your own role in the healing process.

Elizabeth Goodman was just passing through Brooklyn with a group of teenagers, but there, while serving in a soup kitchen, she finds a kindred spirit who lives out the truth she has been seeking to understand for months. Robert Flaherty, a Reserve Army chaplain, describes how he has "moved away from second-hand descriptions of what goes on in various religious ceremonies" and has chosen instead to show up and see for himself. In *Pilgrimage*, he describes his visit to a Wiccan Full Moon Circle.

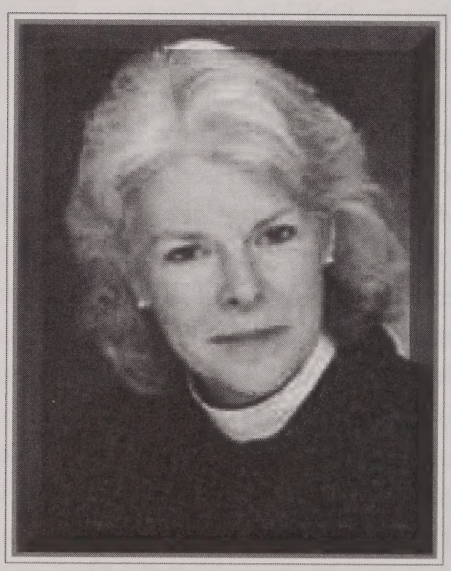
Frequent contributor Donna Schaper offers us a series of no-nonsense prayers. Try praying her way, "You want something from me today, O God. Let me know what it is." In this same direct vein, Brother Thomas More relays a story in *Spirituality & Everyday Life* that reminds us to be ourselves with God.

J. Jerome Smith and John Delli-Carpini mine the terrible times of losing their fathers. While their experiences and perspectives differ, they both come away reminded of God's presence in difficult and dark times.

Lastly, Diane Dreher brings us back to the earth in "Gardens, Healing, and Spiritual Growth." She writes, "time in the garden uncovers the natural harmonies beneath the troubled surface of our world." As the ground thaws, *Illuminations* offer some of Thomas Merton's best thoughts on nature. So dig in, and don't forget to savor some poetry and our book review.

I trust this issue will resonate with you. Listen, learn, but don't forget to sound forth. Let your life resound. We need to hear from you.

Barbara Brown Taylor



A Preacher's Haunting Questions

Barbara Brown Taylor

This is the second of three interviews conducted last summer during the Chautauqua Institution's The Paths of Transformation: Exploring Three Abrahamic Faiths. Regular writer Garnette Arledge, M.Div., sat down with the Rev. Dr. Barbara Brown Taylor dubbed by Newsweek Magazine as one of the twelve most effective preachers in the English language. Taylor is former rector of Grace-Calvary Episcopal Church in Clarkesville, Georgia and currently holds the Harry R. Butman Chair of Religion and Philosophy at Piedmont College in Demorest, Georgia. She travels extensively and is in demand as a popular preacher, speaker, and workshop leader. Taylor's published books include Bread of Angels, Gospel Medicine, The Preaching Life, When God is Silent, Mixed Blessings, Home by Another Way, The Luminous Web: Essays on Science and Religion, *and* Speaking of Sin: The Lost Language of Salvation, *all from Cowley Publishers.*

Sacred Journey: You no longer work as a parish preacher. What are the special parts of parish work that you miss or make the life of a preacher more than trying to figure out what to say on one more Sunday?

Barbara Brown Taylor: I miss the fun, the baptisms, the hospital visits, and the rhythm of the church year. I miss the weekly preaching and working on image over the long term with the same people. Now I have more gratitude than ever for people. I plant seeds when I preach wherever I go. My job is to give people questions that will haunt them the rest of their lives. But I welcomed being let out of the small space to a larger space. I love to stay home, though. We have twenty-six heartbeats, counting the horses, llamas, and guinea hens, around our home.

This week at Chautauqua you have preached to 7000 people at 9:15 am every morning and have managed to establish intimacy with each person in the Auditorium. I noted that during your first public session, fifteen minutes were allotted for your autobiographical sketch, and you stood up and said, "I just noticed my dress is on inside out." During the gasp followed by delighted laughter, you made friends with us all.

I was so surprised, I just said it. All I am aware of is preaching from the heart. I learned this from Fred Craddock. (Fred Craddock is Bandy Distinguished Professor of Preaching and New Testament Emeritus, in the Candler School of Theology, Emory University.) He said inform people what's going on and instantly people relax. It puts them in a better space. Vulnerability is strength. Nakedness is about self-revelation, and that's seen as disarming. But take care not to mistake vulnerability for weakness; people can smell weakness and wait for it.

Are you talking about hospitality rather than weakness?

Yes, intimacy is hospitality. It is our duty to turn people back to religion, to God, not to refuse them, or write them off. Think of the parable of the Ten Lepers; it is really a teaching about xenophobia and its opposite, friendship with the other. In Afghanistan people live by that same ancient code of hospitality. They were not harboring; they *must* share their house with the stranger who comes seeking hospitality. It's an odd Western idea not to give shelter to those who need it; in the East they are obligated to share what they have. We have lost this hospitality.

You write in one of your books about scripture being able to interpret us faster than we can interpret it. Talk please about this dynamic relationship you and others can have with this ancient Christian book.

In my years as an Episcopal priest and before, I have learned to listen to scripture; it has something to tell me. Listen to it as appropriately as listening to an elder, a most reliable of elders. Yet, I–we, can claim the right as children of God to talk back to it. We can seek to illuminate what's on the page that relates to our world, our life. I listen to it like I would to a good grandma with a dynamic relationship of response and contemplation. Scripture has something to tell about my world. Always scripture's place is to give a spiritual metaphor rich, rich with meaning, not literal or only one-layered. Then my imagination, my intuition as gifts and skills of the Holy Spirit, as voices of the Holy Spirit, are to discern insight into the passage.

How do you mine the scriptures for a word to share with others? Is it a special gift you have or is it something others can do?

Read and read and read everybody who ever wrote on the passage and then, I wait on the scriptures to reveal themselves to me. Abiding, I abide with the passage, that's really important to me. I spend weeks and weeks thinking, listening, reading, abiding.

Why do people listen to sermons? Why do you think people come to church or temple and listen?

Sermons are not like lectures, and shouldn't be. Sermons are not sound bites. They are a different kind of speech, more poetry, more imagery. Sermons are learning how to embody the word. People are looking for a place, a voice, a sound to take up residence. If you are asking why I go to church, I say I go to be changed, to see something differently, very occasionally to be confirmed that I am not crazy. To be comforted. People go to worship God in a transcendent space and frame of mind, in a changed space and time. We have agreed to be attentive—and then go outside again more conscious.

You've said your job is to "practice the religion of Jesus, instead of the religion about Jesus." How can one tell the difference?

The definition of Jesus is about God. Jesus was theocentric; it was all God, God, God to Jesus. It was not Jesus about Jesus. Unless I am turned toward God and my neighbor, I am not practicing the religion of Jesus.

A Small Matter of a Miracle

Mary Ann McAlpine

Difficult illness is a part of my life. I am used to hospitals, surgeries, and medical procedures. I have come to know that healing comes from within as well as with the assistance of the medical profession. Unless the patient participates in the healing process there will be no success.

The lessons I've learned over the years are many. A person can do what seems to be impossible. The day of many surgeries you can get up, walk, feed yourself, and soon, take that wonderful first shower. One powerful lesson I recently experienced was the depth of the ability of mind and body to control circumstances science would say were not possible.

I was preparing myself for heart surgery that would take place in a couple of months in a distant city. Prayer, meditation, drawing, and visualization were some of the mediums I employed. I was especially concerned about my son, now in his late twenties, who planned to arrive at the hospital after my surgery late in the afternoon. I knew it would be difficult for him to even come to the hospital. His own history of surgeries and residual anger

Mary Ann McAlpine lives in Michigan where she works as a language arts educational consultant to school districts throughout the state.

resulting from things gone wrong would make this visit a time of personal and physical unrest.

For me to heal, I needed him to know that I would be okay. I needed to know that he would accept that I could do this thing called healing. So I practiced. Mentally, I placed myself in the recovery room. I imagined him coming into my room, taking my hand, and my responding, even though heavily sedated, by squeezing his hand. I practiced this in my mind. Usually before falling asleep each night I repeated this scenario in my mind and heart. I prayed for guidance and success in this attempt to put my son at ease. I told my daughter of my practice. She knew and understood my desire to help her brother come to terms with my ability to heal.

The surgery to repair my mitral valve went well with nothing out of the ordinary happening. However, as the doctors began to disconnect the heart machine, my aorta, the body's main artery, tore near the aortic valve throwing the entire medical team into action to put me back together again. Because of this unexpected complication, I was taken from surgery much later in the day than expected. I was taken to the intensive care unit and for the next twenty-four hours was kept under sedation to allow my body to rest from this unexpected trauma.

My husband knew something had gone wrong and feared the worst. My surgery was expected to last three hours. I was taken to surgery at 6:30 in the morning and it was 3:00 in the afternoon before my family was told anything. My husband and daughter were allowed to see me within moments of my being settled into intensive care. My daughter talked to me because I had asked her to do this. For me this was a critical piece of waking up. The nurse overheard my daughter's words and stated that

it was impossible for me to hear anything since I was too deeply sedated. The nurse suggested that my family leave, get something to eat, and come back later, but that it would be the next day before I could respond.

My family left and went to find my son. Road construction and wrong turns had delayed his arrival time. My husband and daughter explained my surgical complications. This did nothing to strengthen his attitude toward hospitals. However he needed to know what to expect when he saw me. Due to a great loss of blood, I was very gray and much of my body was still covered with a layer of orange disinfectant.

My family returned to the unit. The nurse said that two family members were allowed at one time. My daughter and son came in and I am told that they stood on opposite sides of the bed. My son took my right hand and my daughter said, "Mom, Mike's here. He's holding your hand."

I squeezed his hand to signal my, "Hi, I'm okay." I don't remember it, but I did it. Two very amazed witnesses told me so.

The lesson learned? We are our own teachers. We are our own strength. Each of us—and the Greater Self who lives within-—are capable of miracles.

Sweeping for God

Elizabeth Goodman

While I was in divinity school I sang in the Harvard University Choir, affiliated with the Memorial Church in Harvard Yard. We performed daily at the morning prayer service—the oldest continuous church service on this continent, first gathering in 1636—and for the Sunday Services during the school year. All in all, it was an exalted choir amidst an exalted atmosphere, and it was a thrill, at times a fierce one, to be a member of that elite group of singers.

One of my favorite pieces was a setting of the 23rd Psalm, as arranged by Ralph Vaughn Williams, in which my favorite verse began, "The sure provisions of my God attend me all my days; O may Thy house be my abode, and all my work be praise." Following the weeks when we first sang this piece, in the winter of 1998, this final phrase became my sacred prayer, my mantra: ". . . may all my work be praise."

The Reverend Elizabeth R. Goodman is pastor and teacher of the Monterey United Church of Christ in Monterey, Massachusetts. She also teaches English to 8th and 12th graders at the Berkshire Country Day School. She lives in the Berkshires with her husband and dog.

At that time, regardless of the plain fact that I was in seminary and that the obvious conclusion anyone would draw was that I was studying to become a parish pastor, I was very secretive about my faith. I never discussed my prayer life or my relationship with God with anyone, and I certainly never told anyone that this lyric had in many ways become my life.

A few weeks later, on an April afternoon, I found myself working in a soup kitchen in Park Slope, a depressed neighborhood in Brooklyn. I had never volunteered there before. I may never again. I was just passing through with the youth group I led at the time, on a mission trip to New York to volunteer at soup kitchens and day shelters throughout the city.

There are all sorts of soup kitchens: some nice, others nasty, some big and spacious, others small and foul-smelling. We worked in one that operated out of the sanctuary of an Episcopal church in Chelsea, white marble under our feet, sunlight streaming through stained-glass windows, casting various colors on already variously colored faces, and another that operated out of the fellowship hall of the Love Gospel Assembly, a church that had taken over an abandoned building in the Bronx, brown and darker brown linoleum tile under our feet and no windows at all in the cinderblock walls.

CHIPS, an acronym standing for Christian Help in Park Slope, served out of an old storefront, the kitchen and all the cooks, old women from the neighborhood, huddled in the back room. It could seat forty-eight at a time, and most days served three to five hundred meals in quick shifts of shiftless, homeless, roaming people. The basement, where they stored canned goods, was infested with rats, and most of the perishables, the goods they

would not have been able to sell, had been donated from grocery stores and bakeries. The lettuce was brown, the bananas were bruised, the loaves of bread were already broken. The supervisor, a small forceful woman named Joy, also from the neighborhood, spoke with a Dominican accent and wore an apron with old food on it. The other volunteers that day were regulars as well. They came twice a week every week, a group from a school for children who cannot attend mainstream schools. "They're mildly retarded," Joy explained to me in full voice, "But they don't make much noise."

May all my work be praise.

That day was cool and sunny, spring beginning to break loose, the wind in an uproar. Outside, a line had begun to gather, and when we unlocked the front door, people streamed in, some silently, eyes cast down, others cheery, saying "hello" and "thank you," still others drunk or stoned in some way and acting the part, loud, belligerent, looking to fight. All moved through the serving line, Joy directing them. They sat down, ate, and left, replaced by others who had been waiting outside, Joy directing them in shifts of ten minutes, sometimes less.

When most of the food had run out, the volunteers, once preparing, then serving, now began to clean up. Joy directing us—to clear the tables, to wash the dishes, to fold then stack the chairs in the corner. I was the only one standing still in the center of the room while the one guest who remained hung on and chatted at me.

His voice was thick and difficult to understand. He was missing most of his teeth and he had an Hispanic accent, but I did get most of what he was saying. He

wanted to sweep the floors. He wanted to know if I thought he would be allowed to sweep the floors, because he had just had lunch, and it was chilly outside, and he enjoyed the work, and he seldom had any to do. He wanted to help out by sweeping the floors because the more you work, the more glory there is for the Lord. Working is glory for the Lord.

Did I know what he meant?

Did I agree, that if he swept the floors there would be more glory for the Lord? Because this is how he lived, to glorify the Lord, and *that* you can only do through work. So he wanted to sweep the floors and glorify the Lord.

Did I agree?

Did I know what he meant?

And here was my sacred prayer, that I had learned singing in an elite choir in Harvard University's Memorial Church, "May all my work be praise."

"Yes," I answered, "I do know what you mean."

So we swept that floor together to glorify God.

Prayers by Donna Schaper

Veins mark my legs and my shoulders droop. Birthdays amuse me because I can't remember which it is; anniversaries amaze because I can't believe we've come this far. For grace in the muddle and in the middle, I pray. Amen.

Sometimes I am so cold I could ice skate down the center aisle of my life. I act like I'm not here. Bring me back, O God. Melt me. Mold me. Fill me. Use me. Return spring to my winter. Amen.

Traditions get fuzzy, O God. Why do we have fish on Friday or hang clothes out to dry on Monday? Why am I bent in this shape rather than some other shape? Who did this to me? How did I become what I am? Why do I love my way so much? Is there another way? Let us love our rituals just enough to let them go so that honor not habit may prevail. Amen.

When my family feels like flypaper to me, show me a way to be grateful that I have a family. And teach me how not to get stuck by love. Amen.

Donna Schaper is a minister of the United Church of Christ. She is the author of several books, including Alone But Not Lonely: A Spirituality of Solitude *and* Sabbath Sense: A Spiritual Antidote for the Overworked. *She lives with her family in Florida.*

Gracious God, You of the second and third chance, You who are really in charge, come to me, and let me be born anew and anew. In failure, surrounded by enemies, set a table for us and there let us eat and drink. Amen.

Focus us, O God, on what is important. And then let the details have their say. Give us the Zen of errands, the Hajj of moving cars, the promised land of our own block. In the Name of Home, Amen.

Use me, O God, for a fountain. Let my water spring forth. Let my joy emerge from the very details of living. Let there be gladness in my associates; let me be a part of the fun today. Give me good jokes to tell, deep laughs to belly forth, and when things become hard, deepen my gladness in You. Amen.

You want something from me today, O God. Let me know what it is. Do something with me, O God, that connects me to the song of the age. Let me be a part of Your grand globe. Let me watch the news as one who belongs here, and cares here, and acts here. Don't let me feel small but enlarged by the size and scope of the human community. Connect me. Amen.

Immerse me in grace, let my heart shine, and let Your wisdom take a dance with me at least once this day. Amen.

Help us make good mistakes on our way to becoming the Ones you want us to be. Just today, O God, let me be a part of interacting grace. Let me do something no one expects me to do and let the waters of grace flow around me as well. Amen.

Real Moments in Prayer

Thomas More

In his excellent book *Gratefulness: The Heart of Prayer*, Brother David Stendl-Rast observes that if what is called "God" means the ultimate source of meaning, "then those moments that quench the thirst of the heart are moments of prayer." In such moments, he observes, we communicate with God, which is the essence of prayer.

But often we do not recognize such moments. It is a paradox, he points out, that people who pray at set times sometimes have moments of genuine prayer when they are not saying prayers. And in such moments they may not even recognize that they are praying.

To illustrate this paradox, Brother David uses the example of someone reciting the Psalms with others, who is distracted or irritated by another who is lagging behind everyone else.

A half hour later, this person goes for a walk and watches a sunset. He comes alive from within, his heart expands, he feels one with all creation, and his heart

Brother Thomas More is retired, having previously been the Director of the Franciscan Renewal Center in Santa Barbara, California. He now lives in Kentucky. Brother More is a frequent contributor to Sacred Journey.

celebrates this beauty. At such a moment, David asserts, this person is communicating with his full self, with all there is, with God. Which was the real prayer? The Psalms said with the community or the walk at sunset?

Sometimes prayers are not prayers. Sometimes prayer happens without prayer. And sometimes prayers are prayers when we are not aware they are prayers. Kathleen Norris points to this truth when she tells a story in her book, *The Cloister Walk.*

At the funeral for an old-timer named Bill, in her small Dakota church, Norris says that Bill was a well-known character in the small town, but the newly appointed young pastor knew nothing about Bill. As Kathleen tells the story, "The young pastor was about to begin the intercessory prayer that follows this part of the worship, when one of Bill's oldest friends couldn't resist saying, 'You know, Bill paid me the first fifty cents I ever made back in 1930.'"

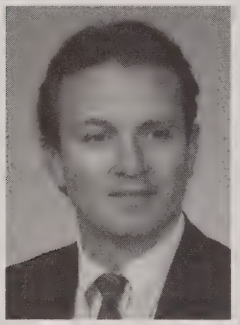
The minister smiled but looked a bit nonplussed. He took a breath, as if to start the prayer. From a pew in the back of the church came a voice, "And I'll bet you still have it." One after another the stories kept coming from different parts of the church, each one provoking gales of laughter. All Bill's friends knew that Bill did not care for decorum, but did have respect for some aspects of religion.

Kathleen concludes the incident as follows, "When the minister finally got to say, 'Let us pray,' we were ready. We had been praying all along. We had been ourselves with God."

Non Nobis, Domine

(Not Unto Us, Lord)

J. Jerome Smith



I last saw my father alive on May 17th. At the end of a rather demanding day at work, I decided to drop by the house to see how he was doing. We all were aware of his terminal cancer diagnosis and knew that he didn't have very much longer. He had lost his voice for the most part as well as his ability to eat and drink. In spite of that, his sense of humor and awareness were very much still intact. His joy at the regular company of so many of his family, friends, and fellow hospice workers with whom he had served as a hospice physician was so evident by the smile on his face. Those who really knew my father were well aware of his intense passion for his Christian faith as

Dr. J. Jerome Smith has practiced dentistry in Lafayette, Louisiana for the past twenty-one years. He and a number of others helped start a medical/dental clinic in Atoyac, Mexico known as Clinica Betel in affiliation with Mexico Ministries and Latin World Ministries for the poor in the state of Guerro. He is married to the former Germaine Gerami and has two daughters, Katheryne and Caroline.

well as his music, in particular the classics. A small portable CD/Radio jambox was situated next to his recliner in our den which was where he had been spending the majority of time during his last days.

That evening I sensed that I should move the entire stereo system into the den so that he could really enjoy his music during his last days. After I got everything connected and situated, he whispered to me in his raspy voice, "Henry the Fifth." I left the room and scoured through the vast CD collection in his study and finally located it. Upon returning to the den, I inserted the CD and handed him the remote control. He selected *Non Nobis*, which is the Latin title of Psalm 115. The psalmist writes, "Not to us, Lord, not to us, but to your name give glory, because of your faithfulness and love."

Many scholars have stated that Henry V is the most active dramatic experience Shakespeare has ever offered his audience. The experience climaxes at the end of the final battle where King Henry, in the aftermath of the Battle of Agincourt, makes his way across the dead-strewn battlefield carrying the body of a fallen youth. The lyrics are sung in Latin and are as follows:

Non nobis domine, domine,
Non nobis domine,
Sed nomine, sed nomine
tuo da gloriam.

That evening after I left, I later learned that my dad turned the volume up pretty high with the remote control and grasped the broken end of an old fishing pole, which I'm sure had been used on countless fishing trips in the Atchafalaya Basin and Toledo Bend Lake over the years

for landing more than a few largemouth bass, and began conducting his favorite melody of all of his favorites with eyes closed and a most peaceful and joyful smile on his face. On the last evening of his earthly life, he enjoyed his family, his friends, and most of all, his music. That scene is forever etched in my memory and gives me a great sense of peace whenever I reflect back on that time.

Several months later in the Christ Church Cathedral in Sherman, Texas, a missionary from southern Mexico was ordained into the Charismatic Episcopalian Church. I have had the privilege of working with this man and his wife in helping to bring medicines as well as dental care to the poor of Atoyac, Mexico for a number of years. For me, they both have served as the strongest examples of unselfish service and profound Christian example. Almost on a whim I decided to fly to Texas to attend his ordination.

That song left me with an awareness of my dad's presence.

At the end of this beautiful and sacred ceremony, much to my surprise and amazement, the entire congregation joined in and sang *Non Nobis* with all eyes uplifted to the heavens. I'm still at a terrible loss to describe in words how I felt at that moment upon hearing this chorus from Henry V sung on that evening.

There have been only a small handful of occasions in my personal life when I have felt a strong and almost palpable sense of God's presence in my life that defy explanation. For the most part, these moments have caught me totally by surprise and usually came at times when I needed them. When the church sang *Non Nobis* at the end of the ordination Mass I was spellbound. Time

stopped for me. I was unable to sing along with the rest of the congregation. Tears rolled down my cheeks. God's presence and the memory of my father was so real as was the beauty of the ceremony which I had just witnessed and been a participant in.

Hearing this song again left the indelible impression on my soul that my dad's presence would always be with me as long as my eyes, ears, and spirit remained open. With that I am left with a sense of peace that I'm not certain I have ever felt before.

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Thomas Merton: Writings on Nature

. . . I live in the woods out of necessity. I get out of bed in the middle of the night because it is imperative that I hear the silence of the night and, with my face on the floor, say psalms, alone in the silence of the night.

How necessary it is for monks to work in the fields, in the rain, in the sun, in the mud, in the clay, in the wind: these are our spiritual directors and our novice-masters. They form our contemplation. They instill us with virtue. They make us as stable as the land we live in.

For, like a grain of fire
smoldering in the heart
of every living essence
God plants His undivided power—
Buries His thought too vast
for worlds
In seeds and roots and blade
and flower.

The hills are suddenly dark blue. Very green alfalfa in the bottoms. Yellow of mustard or siena sage grass in my own field. Here there is no impatience. I am a submerged dragon. The peace of the Alleluias.

I came home walking along the shelves of shale that form the bed of the creek. Our woods are beautiful. The peace of the woods almost always steals over me when I am at prayer in the monastery.

Peace and beauty of Easter morning: sunrise, deep green grass, soft winds, the woods turning green on the hills across the valley (and here too). I got up and said the old office of Lauds, and there was a wood thrush singing fourth-tone mysteries in the deep ringing pine wood (the "unconscious" wood) behind the hermitage. (The "unconscious" wood has a long moment of perfect clarity at dawn, and from being dark and confused, lit from the east it is all clarity, all distinct, seen to be a place of silence and peace with its own order in disorder—the fallen trees don't matter, they are a part of it.)

It is strange awakening to find the sky inside you and beneath you and above you and all around you so that your spirit is one with the sky, and all is positive night.

The sun is rising. All the green trees are full of birds, and their song comes up out of the wet bowers of the orchard. Crows swear pleasantly in the distance, and in the depths of my soul sits God.

To go out to walk silently in this wood—this is a more important and significant means to understanding, and the moment, than a lot of analysis and a lot of reporting on things "of the spirit."

Selections from When the Trees Say Nothing: Writings on Nature *by Thomas Merton, © 2003 by Kathleen Deignan, editor, John Giuliani, artist. Published by and available from Sorin Books, www.sorinbooks.com.*

A Visit to the Full Moon Circle

Robert L. Flaherty

I arrived at the Wiccan meeting place about 8:10 P.M., ten minutes after the announced starting time on Saturday evening. The sun was still shining although the moon had already risen and was clearly visible.

A short while before the ceremony was to begin, Joann and David, the high priestess and high priest, moved to the circle area. I followed. On the way I met Tony, who would be one of the five guardians for the ceremony. Four of the guardians would be stationed outside the circle. Traditionally, the guardians kept hostile intruders from entering the circle. Spiritually, the guardians protect the circle from bad spiritual energy. Further, the guardians "ground" the energy that escapes the circle. The fifth guardian works within the circle, grounding energy, protecting the circle from bad energy and if necessary expelling disruptive people.

Robert Flaherty is a Reserve Army Chaplain. He was on a one-year active duty tour when he made this visit to a Wiccan open circle. He makes his home in Roseburg, Oregon, where he is pastor of First United Methodist Church.

A navy blue background cloth with white stars covered the stone altar. Joann explained the symbolism of the objects that were on the altar. A round mirror was in the center of the altar. A flat round stone with a pentagram was on the mirror. These were the central objects. On each side was a kerosene lantern. The two lights represented the gods and goddesses who would be invoked for the ceremony. A sea shell with a bit of salt represented the earth. Some altars would have a bit of earth rather than salt. Two goblets were on the altar, one for water, a cosmic symbol, the other for wine, which the participants would sip. An animal horn was on the altar because tonight's ceremony was primarily a Nordic ceremony. The horn represented the Teutonic (Viking) culture. A small sheaf of sage would be used to spread smoke around the circle. Two wands, a staff, incense, and a few other objects were also on the altar.

Before the participants were invited to come into the circle, the high priestess and high priest "set the circle." Joann walked the circle in a clockwise direction carrying the water goblet. As she did, she sprinkled some of the water and said a prayer invoking water, sea, and earth to protect the circle. David followed with sage saying almost the identical prayer while invoking wind and air.

One by one the participants arrived at the "gate," a break in the stone circumference of this circle. The priestess and priest met each person. One of the guardians explained, "No electronic devices—watches, cell phones, pagers, and so on—are allowed in the circle. They produce and conduct their own energy."

Once inside, the participants moved clockwise around the edges of the circle until they found the place they wanted to stand. "People stand wherever they want within the circle," a guardian explained.

The ritual began with Joann and then David making invocations while facing the altar. Joann and David then walked to the four cardinal points of the circle. In the east, the attendant offered an invocation to one of the gods. Then in the south and west, the respective guardians made an invocation. During each invocation, the participants faced the direction with hands raised above their heads. Each invocation concluded with a welcome to the deity. Those gathered responded, "Hail and welcome" and added the name of the god or goddess.

The more I experience the religions of the world, the more common threads impress me.

After the invocations came a time of divination. Joann instructed people to move to one of the points on the circle to meet with the attendant who offered each person a Tarot card or a symbolic rock. Then the person was to read from a book about the card or rock to receive instruction "about what they should work on or what direction they should take." For the twenty-five people gathered, the whole process took only about ten minutes.

Just before dismissal, Joann opened a bag of chocolate chip cookies and sent them around the circle. The dismissal was nearly a repetition of the invocation. Joann and David faced the altar and thanked the gods for being present. Then they moved to the other points of the circle—east, south, west—where each attendant said a similar prayer to the gods or goddesses of their station. Again, participants faced each direction with raised hands and concluded each prayer with the words, "hail and farewell" to the god or goddess.

Throughout the whole forty-five minute ritual, I was asking questions. Is there a central story like the Christian story of a savior? Are the stories of the various traditions embraced by Wiccans separate stories or variations of a central shared story? Am I witnessing a revival of an ancient tradition or is this a new religion that is being inspired by a more ancient religion? One essential element of all religion, at least from my view, is a sense of cultural identity. Religion is not separate from the culture; rather it is an expression of the culture. Were cultural moorings missing from this present experience?

While I was pondering, I also made connections with what I saw and heard. Walking around the circle in a clockwise direction reminded me of circumambulation in both Hindu and Buddhist traditions, in which devotees walk around an altar or around the outside of the temple in a clockwise direction. I have puzzled over the clockwise movement. Being an inhabitant of the northern hemisphere, I thought the direction might have something to do with the way we experience the rotation of the earth. Friends have corrected me by reminding me that people in the southern hemisphere experience the earth's rotation in a counterclockwise direction. The traditions I mentioned here are all northern hemisphere traditions. I wonder whether people in the southern hemisphere circumambulate in a counterclockwise direction. Perhaps the counterclockwise orientation is to follow the sun as it rises in the east and sets in the west. I cannot help but think we are tied into our experience of nature even if the tie is unconscious.

The altar was filled with symbols one finds in many of the world's religions, including Christianity: candles, chalices of wine and water, and incense. Claiming sacred

space by sprinkling it with holy water or incensing it is a common religious motif. David and Joann claimed the space of the circle with water and incense. A Catholic or Episcopal priest incenses the altar, circumambulating clockwise to set apart that space as sacred. The priest will also incense the congregation and sprinkle holy water.

The cardinal directions are common to earth or nature religions including Buddhism and Native American religions. I suspect they are important to other indigenous or primitive—I don't even know what language to use—religions. Colors were associated with the directions in a scheme that is similar to those of Tibetan Buddhism and Native American traditions. Hebrew and Christian scriptures refer to the "four corners" of the earth. Directional orientation is important in other ways as well. One of the guardians told us, "Different traditions make the entry way into the circle in different directions, some in the north, others in the south. We have the entrance in the east." Hindu and Buddhist temples are generally oriented on an east-west axis with the opening to the *sanctum sanatorium* in the east to catch the first rays of sun. Christians traditionally bury the dead facing east so they are prepared for resurrection when Christ returns with the rising sun.

Watching participants raise their hands in prayer made me think of my experiences in Pentecostal or charismatic worship. Most recently I have had a similar experience in a Hindu temple. While worshippers were chanting, spontaneously some began to sway. Others clapped to the rhythm of the chant. Still others raised their hands.

The chocolate chip cookies reminded me of communion in churches or *prasad* in the Hindu temples. After visiting a Hindu temple where you visit the deity, the priest, on

behalf of the deity, gives you a gift in return in the form of a small, sugary treat.

The more I experience the religions of the world, the more common threads impress me. I find common themes, as well as real differences, in the written texts. As I've moved away from trusting second-hand descriptions of what goes on in various religious ceremonies and begun to observe or better yet, to participate, I've been struck by the similarity of symbols and behaviors. I assume there is a common psychic or spiritual force at work that draws people toward similar symbols and behaviors. Diversity appears to come with the stories of each religion. The stories, different as they may be, give content to the shared symbols and behaviors.

Prayer

Rehel Goldberg Bader

to place the call
i searched for words
in newspapers, thesaurus,
the dictionary,
all inadequate and
futile

instead,
i lit an incense candle
and watched as the words
i could not find
curled over, and
browned down
into gray smoke
a signal

like the heart of
a drum beating
and You
just as You are
burdenend by unfinished promises,
delayed by an other world tryst
heard
and hovered
above the fire
like the passion
of faith
and remembered

Rehel Goldberg Bader retired from social work and now writes poetry and short stories. She is a student of dreams, art, and the Kabbalah. She lives in Florida.

Home

Sue Coppernoll

Arriving
after a journey of decades
decisions made, decisions deferred

feet solidly in the rich loam of the garden
hands grimy, nicked with thorns
I am here.

Not there
or everywhere
but here.

Rooted and swaying
with the rustle of the wind
and a symphony of birdsong

I greet the dawn, filling my lungs
with the fragrance of flowers
and the aroma of life.

Checking in, registering my presence
in communion with squirrel and earthworm,
I kneel to say my morning prayers.

Gratitude, awe, and wonder
rise from the top of my head, seep from the pores of my skin,
sing in the bend of my knee.

Celebrating
the gift that is home
I offer a hymn of praise
in tones imperfect and quavering,
knowing my sounds to be
music to the ears of God.

Soliloquy

Anne Saint-Sergius

What shall we pray for
facing east each dawn
before the sun our shrine:
For wealth and riches,
to our health? Or merely

To catch a shaft of Light
within our eyes . . .

Sue Coppernoll is enjoying her "non-retirement." In her sixtieth year, her dedication to peace and non-violence led her to ordination in The Church of the Brethren.

Anne Saint-Sergius' poem is from her collection Thebaid of the North. *She is a classically-trained concert pianist living in New York State.*

Finding God in Darkness

John Delli Carpini

A few years ago, my father succumbed to complications due to Alzheimer's disease. Although I knew for years that he was dying, his passing was still a shock. I watched him become more and more helpless, like a child, and, in the process, felt I could do nothing to assist him. Unlike a heart attack or stroke, Alzheimer's kills slowly and over time. The body usually remains healthy until the final months and days, but the mind slips away with each tick of the clock. Alzheimer's disease robbed my father of his memories, the precious gift I wanted him to give me as he wrote the final chapters of his life. In the end, I felt I was being robbed by God, not only of my father, but of his life-giving memories.

No one knows what caregivers experience as they attend the many needs of an ailing relative. It is often a lonely and frustrating task. My father was not able to say"thank you" because he wasn't aware of the care I was providing day in and day out.

John Delli Carpini, Ph.D. is the author of Poetry As Prayer: Emily Dickinson *and* Prayer and Piety in the Poems of Gerard Manley Hopkins. *He writes often about literature and spirituality.*

I found many books published on caring for Alzheimer's patients; many of them were helpful, but I couldn't find much written about the spiritual aspects of dealing with this cruel disease. I often felt abandoned by family and friends because I had to sacrifice my social life. Who cares for the caregiver? Even God seemed far away. I believed that no one understood what I was experiencing, and I just didn't have the words to adequately describe what caring for my father was like.

As with all the challenging experiences, I prayed even though God seemed far away. Sometimes I didn't even know what I was praying, but I remembered prayer's basic definition from my childhood--lifting my heart and mind to God. That's what I was doing, lifting a heavy heart and giving God a piece of my mind. I didn't even care if God was listening; it just felt good to tell God. Throughout this experience I moved from asking God to change my fate to realizing that God also wept for my father. I appreciated God's companionship and thought of Christ's words, "Come to me, all you who are burdened." God was beside me sharing the yoke and making my burden lighter. I realized the alternative, namely without God, things always got worse.

I began to cherish my few moments of silence with God each day. These minutes helped me to find meaning in what I was doing. Above all, I realized that I was not alone. After a while, I didn't ask God to take away my problems, but to help me bear them with faith and courage. Refreshed and at peace, I allowed God to help me lift the load which is always easier when someone lends a hand.

A spiritual lesson that I haven't learned easily over time is that the darkest moments of my life are often the

most illuminating. Prayer became an indispensable and integral component of my life, not only when it came to caring for my father, but for my spiritual health in general. I am certainly not contemplative like a monk, but I felt challenged by this experience to be a contemplative. Contemplation literally means to build a temple, a sacred space where God can enter.

"How lovely is your place," we pray in Psalm 84. "My soul yearns, even faints, for the courts of the Lord; my heart and my flesh cry out for the living God." Feeling tired and alone, when I built a place for God to live, I realized that God was never very far away. To know God is close is essential to anyone burdened with an impossible task. Even on the narrow path, darkening night, and deepening emptiness of caring for my father, I found God in new and astonishing ways. I even found myself doing a better job as a caregiver. The fruit of my relationship with God was love, a love I could share with others, especially those entrusted to my care.

Contemplation means to build a temple where God can enter.

In his poem, "The Night," Henry Vaughan writes that we can find God even in the narrowing, darkening, and emptiness. Vaughan believes that even in these places, God exists. In caring for my father, I learned this is true. In my daily prayer, in building the temple where I met God every day, I found meaning, peace, and love, and, most of all, realized that God is never very far away.

There is God (some say)

A deep, but dazzling darkness; as men here

Say it is late and dusky, because they

See not all clear;

O for that night! Where I in him

Might live invisible and dim.

Gardens, Healing, and Spiritual Growth

Diane Dreher

"Time began in a garden," says the small wooden sign by my garden gate, recalling the Biblical Garden of Eden. Our word "paradise" by itself once meant an enclosed garden. The Western garden tradition developed fifteen centuries ago in Benedictine monasteries, self-contained agricultural communities where monks grew grain, fruits, herbs, and vegetables. Cultivating an enduring connection between gardening and spiritual growth, early Benedictines combined *laborare* and *orare*, the work of hands and hearts in alternating rhythms of devotion.

For centuries, monastery gardens and spiritual practice informed the lives of Western Europeans, religious and laity alike. Daily devotions followed the sun's rounds, and the liturgical paralleled the annual cycle of seed time and

Diane Dreher is Professor of English at Santa Clara University in California and author of Inner Gardening: Four Seasons of Cultivating the Soil and Spirit *published by Willliam Morrow in 2001.*

harvest, death and rebirth. Saints' days corresponded with sowing, reaping, and harvest feasts. Each day the dark days of winter were dispelled at Easter as gardens in early spring bloomed with the promise of eternal life.

From the Middle Ages through the Renaissance, people perceived the world as a divine poem, in which the individual, or *microcosm*, corresponded with the *macrocosm*, or larger world around them. The garden became a living guide to devotion: the harvest represented God's bounty, cultivating the soil was an exercise in humility, and sowing seeds became an act of faith. The rosary was named for the rosarium, the medieval rose garden. Many saints, including Francis de Sales, John of the Cross, Teresa of Avila, and Catherine of Siena, meditated in gardens, and St. Ignatius Loyola ended his *Spiritual Exercises* with a vision of all creation informed by the loving presence of God. English poets from Chaucer to Shakespeare, Donne, Herrick, Herbert, Vaughan, Milton, and Marvell wrote of spiritual lessons they found in the garden. Shakespeare described the symbolic importance of pruning in Richard III, and Herbert's poem, "*The Flower*," portrayed the soul's growth through many seasons of doubt and renewal.

Centuries before hospitals and drug stores, people turned to their gardens to heal colds, sore throats, indigestion, and other physical illnesses. They used garlic as a tonic and antiseptic; dill as a sedative and cure for indigestion; thyme for coughs and colds: marjoram to treat aching joints; rosemary to improve memory and to treat stiff necks and sore muscles; lavender for headaches; mint for colds, anger, and indigestion; parsley to treat migraines; and sage as an all-purpose remedy. Early monasteries had their herb gardens and herbalists. The

medieval abbess Hildegard of Bingen celebrated "veriditas," the greening power of life, which she saw as evidence of God's grace in the world, the key to vitality, goodness and health.

Contemplating the beauty of nature has long been a path of spiritual healing. The medieval Franciscan, St. Bonaventure, encouraged people to meditate on the beauty of the natural world, and seventeenth-century poet Thomas Traherne wrote: "You never enjoy the world aright, till you see how a sand exhibiteth the wisdom and power of God: . . . till the sea itself floweth in your veins, till you are clothed with the heavens, and crowned with the stars." For Traherne, nature was not a commodity to be exploited but a divine gift to be shared in loving communion, his vision anticipating the holistic message of today's organic gardeners and environmentalists.

Like Adam and Eve in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, people for centuries have found a "paradise within," cultivating their souls along with their gardens. St. Thomas More studied religion and philosophy in his garden at Chelsea with his friend, Erasmus of Rotterdam. In difficult times, gardens have become sources of consolation and renewal. Amid the violent world of the English Civil War, seventeenth-century poet Andrew Marvell sought serenity in his garden, meditating on "a green thought in a green shade." During the dark days of World War II, Winston Churchill found renewal working in his garden at Chartwell.

The connection between gardens and healing has developed into horticultural therapy, now practiced in hospitals, prisons, and convalescent homes. Research has shown that gardening reduces stress and promotes a healthier outlook. In the mid-1980s psychologist Marilyn

Barrett combined gardening with clinical practice, helping people heal their lives by clearing the ground, cultivating the soil, and planting new seeds, gaining greater insight by working with the cycles of nature.

Scientific research has rediscovered what saints and sages realized centuries ago: that renewing our connection with nature heals us on many levels. In one study, convalescent home residents who were given plants to tend stayed healthier and lived longer. In another study, surgery patients with trees growing outside their hospital windows suffered less pain and recovered more quickly than others who faced only bare brick walls.

Gardening helps restore our sense of hope. Psychologist Martin Seligman has demonstrated the strong connection between depression and "learned helplessness," when people feel that nothing they do makes any difference. Helping defeat learned helplessness,

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gardening offers tangible results for our efforts: seeds germinate; plants blossom and bear fruit. In small but powerful ways, our gardens reassure us that our actions *can* make a difference. They remind us that we are part of a pattern of infinite meaning we cannot fathom but which graces us with moments of surprising beauty.

Gardening can become a spiritual exercise, teaching us discernment as we eliminate the weeds from our lives, giving what we value room to grow. By cultivating the soil, we develop perseverance. For good soil is created layer upon layer, season upon season, with repeated applications over time of compost and other organic matter. So, too, do we cultivate the important areas of our lives: our faith, our vocation, and our relationships with deep abiding love, over time, with one small action leading to the next.

In my own life, the contemplative time I spend in my garden makes me more present, more peaceful, more whole. Medieval Benedictines alternated private time for reading and reflection with the ritualized prayer of the Divine Office. *Lectio divina*, or contemplative reading, for many people throughout history has also meant drawing inspiration from the book of nature, a practice begun in medieval cloisters and meditation gardens, embraced by Renaissance poets, and taken to heart by gardeners from their time to our own. For time in the garden uncovers the natural harmonies beneath the troubled surface of our world. Simple actions such as staking the tomatoes, raking and composting fallen leaves, watering, weeding, and trimming, can become healing rituals, helping us plant the seeds of new possibilities, cultivate our talents, and exercise our faith so that we may go in peace to love and serve the world.

BOOKS WE'VE ENJOYED

You Don't Have to Sit on the Floor: Making Buddhism Part of Your Everyday Life. By Jim Pym. Published by Seastone of Ulysses Press, 2002. Paperback, 181 pages. Reviewed by Alicia Karen Elkins.

You Don't Have to Sit on the Floor is a book that puts a new twist on an old subject. Never before have I found Buddhism defined in such a simple way. The author explains that Buddhism is not about the rituals, symbols, or practices that have been associated with the traditional versions of it. Instead, it is about "Dharma," the state of freeing yourself from stress and suffering, of reaching a state of happiness known as "nirvana." Pym utilizes techniques from his teachings at workshops, retreats, and conferences to assist the reader in finding their own "comfort zone" with achieving Dharma. The book is filled with exercises, meditations, stories, quotes, and visualizations. The author maintains that individuals will respond in their own unique way to the practices. They should use only those exercises that bring positive results. If they are not comfortable with something, they should not try to force themselves to do it. Buddhism is not about forcing yourself to adhere to the traditional or cultural practices of Japan, China, Thailand, Sri Lanka, or Tibet.

Karen Elkins is working on the last two courses for her M.A. in Creative Writing. She plans to continue with her Ph.D. and teach online. She lives in New Mexico.

Buddhism is still evolving in the Western Hemisphere, being adapted into our culture and lifestyles.

The part of this book that I found most interesting was the part dealing with how God fits into Buddhism. Like so many, I was under the impression that if you believe in God, you cannot be a Buddhist. The author sets that record straight. He illustrates in a nutshell the problems with history according to the Bible. He shows that belief in God and Buddhism can be synchronized in daily living and need not conflict with each other. This is a wonderfully enlightening book. It will strengthen the reader's spirituality and assist in overcoming the stress of daily obstacles. Other books by Jim Pym are *The Pure Principle* and *Listening to the Light*. He is the coordinator for the Pure Land Buddhist Fellowship. He is a member of the Council of the Buddhist Society and the Religious Society of Friends.

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